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ABSTRACT

Interpreting Aristotle's criteria for persuasive writing--ethos, logos, and pathos--as a concern for writer, language, and audience creates both an effective model for persuasive writing and a structure around which to organize discussions of relevant rhetorical issues. Use of this heuristic to analyze writing style, organization, and content generates many useful insights on the persuasive mode. For example, when students evaluate sentences or style with reference to the identity of the writer, they realize that if sentences are to reflect the writer's good judgment, they should be grammatically correct; if good character, they should refrain from insult; if good will, they should be clear, concise, and coherent. When students turn their attention to the audience's needs, they find that sentences showing skillful use of figurative language, rhythm, or tropes have more persuasive impact. When considering the language as a whole, they discover that each sentence must further the general argument. Using this model to analyze organization and content as well as sentences and style, students develop an understanding of the demands of persuasive writing. (MM)

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A HEURISTIC FOR THE TEACHING OF PERSUASION

John F. Schell

It is ironic--and sometimes a little confusing--that much of today's classroom work in what is called rhetoric has little to do with rhetoric in its classical, philosophical tradition. A glance at a Rhetoric Handbook might lead one to conclude that rhetoric is correct usage or full description or general to specific paragraphs. What we know as rhetoric, of course, is more inclusive than the field of study defined by Aristotle as, "the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion." In fact, what we know as rhetoric often overlooks persuasion entirely, instead presenting rhetoric to be expository, referential, implemental, informative--or whatever term you prefer.

But what we today study as rhetoric is not the only instance of persuasion's neglect. Indeed, much contemporary discourse theory overlooks persuasion. James Britton's detailed work The Development of Writing Abilities evolves from a study of student writing samples. And since less than 2% of the student scripts he examined were persuasive, Britton concludes that persuasion is of limited importance. James Moffett's 1968 taxonomy of discourse fails to identify persuasion as a special type of communication, and Frank D'Angelo omits persuasion from his conceptual theory. Of

recent discourse theorists, James Kinneavy does treat persuasion at length, identifying it as one of the four aims of discourse which come to generate his taxonomy.

This neglect of persuasion--in the classroom and in research--might legitimately lead one to infer that persuasion is no longer prevalent, that it is of limited importance in our society. Using similar induction, if the importance of a discourse is judged by the amount of research it inspires, expressive writing must be the dominant form in our day.

But we all know that for every poem that gets read each day, we endure at least 25 advertisements. For every piece of Freshman autobiography, five letters begging for money. For every prayer, twenty sanctimonious pleas from political interest groups. Persuasion--not on the decline--is rampant. A marketing director for General Foods Corporation claims that the average New Yorker sees 1518 ads from newspapers, magazines, busses and subways, radio and television--every day! Add to that the persuasive appeals other than advertising that permeate the written media: appeals from religious, social, and government figures: pleas to accept Jesus, to stop smoking in elevators, to support money for the MX missile.

Persuasion was important in Aristotle's day because of its use in the courts, assemblies, and amphitheaters. Our democratic society uses persuasion in many of the same ways, but we add to its prominence. Our relative, secular, consumer society invites competition of ideas, values, and commodities. Each enhances the role of persuasion.

If it is not the relative unimportance of persuasion, what is the reason for its neglect? One cause may be discovered in the background of the theorists. As Britton's research shows, persuasion occurs less frequently in the classroom than do other types of writing: exposition, narration, description, expression. And since most theorists, like Britton, are also academicians, it is reasonable for them to pay less attention to a kind of writing they meet less often in their professional lives.

All of us who teach writing--especially freshman composition--will surely attest to the limited role of persuasion at that level. But it was not until I first taught a course in business and government writing that I fully realized how artificial is the classroom situation and how influential is that environment upon the writing produced there. In business writing, persuasion is very important--and not just the relatively pure persuasions found in sales brochures and ads. Annual reports--as their slick formats suggest--are highly persuasive--as are proposals, position papers, recommendations, and evaluations.

In addition to the paucity of persuasion in the classroom, there may be yet another reason why it receives less attention than other kinds of discourse, a reason that became more apparent to me as I taught the same business and government writing course I just referred to. There is no neat and simple way to teach persuasion. By comparison, non-persuasive forms are easy to teach. One can instruct the

conventions of a progress report, the demands of a manual, the form of a monthly log. Or one can teach the 500 word theme structure. Or even how to create a voice for expressive writing. But, each persuasion is unique. Not only is each unique, but no readily accessible model for the analysis of persuasion exists.

Now it is true, of course, that since classical days, many methods for the analysis and writing of persuasion have been offered, studied, used--but their very number and complexity hamper their adoption in the classroom. If one subscribes to Toulmin or Perelman, then logic is the most pressing issue in persuasion. According to Pike, Young and a host of authors in Three C's, it is invention. Other theories stress sentence combining, readability studies, psycho-linguistics, and metaphor theory. All are useful, but what is needed is a simple--yet fairly thorough--model that might be a heuristic for either analyzing a piece of persuasion or for creating persuasion of one's own.

James Kinneavy states that, "probably the Aristotelian framework can provide the analytical guidelines for the careful work on the persuasive function that needs to occur." Kinneavy's remark finds defence in Frank D'Angelo's theory of cognitive rhetoric. If discourse--like language--has a universal deep structure that mirrors human thought, then that structure will find be reflected in the work of Aristotle as readily as anywhere. From D'Angelo's hypothesis, Aristotle's Rhetoric becomes not mere early theory, its importance not

limited to that of historical curiosity, and the ideas more than the foundation for later developments and evolutions. D'Angelo's theory of deep structure legitimizes--justifies--looking to Aristotle for persuasive theory. His insights are as relevant today as 2,200 years ago.

Not only does D'Angelo's deep-structure theory validate Aristotle's Rhetoric, it also encourages comparison between Aristotle's work and that of today's rhetoricians. The deduction is as follows. 1) Human cognition hasn't changed since Aristotle; 2) discourse is a reflection of human cognition; 3) therefore, all theorists--Aristotle, Britton, Kinneavy, Burke--are examining the same phenomena with the same tools. The next conclusion is inevitable: Aristotelian theory may complement contemporary theory--and vice versa.

When thinking of Aristotelian teaching in light of today's work, when considering possible areas of reciprocity between Aristotelian and contemporary theory, two areas of Greek philosophical rhetoric assume added significance: the parts of the persuasive discourse and the means of persuasion. It is with these two that I form a simple heuristic for persuasion.

I would like first to return to D'Angelo and his revelation that the Aristotelian parts of a discourse are the result and the reflection of cognition. According to D'Angelo, topics, arrangement, and style are only quantitatively different analogues of the mind, not qualitatively different.

D'Angelo reasons, "Conceptual patterns of sentences, conceptual patterns of extended discourse, and topical patterns of discovery are all structurally related. In other words, the topics of invention, the patterns of arrangement, and the stylistic aspects of sentences, when they reveal similar conceptual structures, are all closely interrelated. We call these processes topics when they serve a heuristic function; we call them patterns of arrangement when they are used to organize discourse; we call them stylistic when they inform sentences. All, in fact, are symbolic manifestations of the same underlying thought processes."

Accepting D'Angelo's theory that topics, style, and arrangement reflect cognition in differing degree rather than differing kind, one can arrive at two conclusions. First, that Aristotle's parts of persuasion are the bedrock of persuasive discourse, the quiddity of rhetoric. Second, that the topics, arrangement, and style lend themselves to analysis by the same criteria. Since they are analogues of the mind that differ only by degree, they can be studied using the same method. The next problem is to determine what are those criteria: what standards, what influences affect the sentence, the arrangement, and the topics, which might--by application--elucidate these three symbolic manifestations of the same underlying thought processes.

Aristotle is blunt about the criteria for persuasion. "Of the means of persuasion supplied by the speech itself," not the memorizing of the speech or its delivery, "there are three

kinds. The first kind resides in the character of the speaker (ethos); the second consists in producing a certain attitude in the hearers (logos); the third appertains to the argument proper (pathos). . . ." These are the three available means of persuasion Aristotle identifies. And, when viewed from the perspective offered by contemporary discourse theory, these three look surprisingly familiar. Aristotle's means of persuasion are similar to the three legs of the communication triangle of Charles Morris, that triangle that so influences most modern discourse theory.

Since Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos complement our coder, message, and decoder--writer, writing, and reader--we might profitably employ Aristotle's concepts as the prism through which to refract persuasion--much as theorists today study various forms of discourse by means of writer-language-audience criteria. In short, we now have a means to analyze persuasive discourse. Sentences, arrangement, and content are reflections of the mind's structure with each assuming its persuasive nature according to the influence of ethos, logos, and pathos--the character of the speaker, the content of the discourse, and the attitude of the audience.

This method is not advanced by Aristotle. Instead, Aristotle's Rhetoric focuses upon the three components of the semiotic structure themselves--narrowing down to examine logic in the speech, emotions in the audience, and appearance in the speaker--rather than applying logos, ethos, and pathos to the persuasion. It is a different strategy.

While Aristotle doesn't methodize the application of ethos, logos, and pathos to the persuasive discourse, neither does he forbid it. To the contrary, Book 3.14 suggests just such an operation. In discussing arrangement and a work's Proem, Aristotle notes alternative strategies: "These proems have their source in 1) the speaker; 2) the audience 3) the subject." Here Aristotle does what I believe is a useful process for an entire perusasion; he identifies the determining factor for one part of the discourse as any of the three available means of persuasion.

Applying this model to a persuasion generates useful insights. For instance, apply the smallest of the conceptual patterns reflected in persuasion--sentences or style--to the identity of the speaker: his good judgment, character, and will. If the sentences are to reflect good judgement, they should be grammatically and mechanically correct. If good character, they should refrain from insult, pettiness, or ribaldry. If good will, they should be clear, concise and coherent. From a different perspective, for the sake of good will, the sentences should be varied in length and complexity, developing the T-groups in effective and efficient ways.

It is in the area of senteces and good will that many novice writers err. Blinded by mistaken self-interest and the desire to appear profound, beginning writers borrow a style they think impressive, a style of bloated diction, needless nominalization, frequent passives, and meaningless abstraction. Unfortunately, this Official Style, to borrow

Richard Lanham's term, doesn't even please other official stylists. It is universally offensive. But by writing lucid and enjoyable prose, the writer displays a concern for her audience and creates a sense of her own good will.

When the attitude of the audience--not the character of the speaker--is of primary concern, a different set of issues influences this same sentence/style component. To be persuasive the sentences must work toward creating the desired effect in the reader. Here is where figurative language, rhythm, tropes and schemes may enter the picture. Here too is where Winston Weather's recent thoughts about Grammar B in An Alternative Style might find play. Or if the audience is to be logically moved, then the style might be highly architectonic or totally stripped of ornamentation.

Finally, applying to the sentences the third means of persuasion--quoting Aristotle, "the argument proper, in so far as it actually or seemingly demonstrates"--this third means reveals yet other considerations. Sentences as proof--demonstrations, to use Aristotle's word--introduce issues of veracity or plausability as well as the appropriateness of each sentence, its content and form. Finally, every sentence might be judged as to whether it furthers the "argument proper."

What I have just briefly exemplified with the sentence/style component can also be done with arrangement and finally with the overall content, creating a heuristic device to analyze an existing persuasion or to generate ideas for the

creation of one's own persuasion. For instance, to analyze an existing persuasion such as the Declaration of Independence, one might study the progress and evolution of its arrangement in terms of how it reflects the character of the authors or colonies. What kind of judgment is being reflected? what sort of ethical nature? good will toward whom? Or, writers who want to create their own persuasions might consider the ways their arrangement will influence the attitudes of their audience. A conventional form--introduction, statement, argument, refutation, conclusion--appeals to the reader's judgment and logic while a convoluted arrangement might create emotion. Similarly, the content of the persuasion, like the sentences and the arrangement, unfolds when analyzed using ethos, logos, and pathos.

What I am recommending is certainly not difficult nor recondite: simply that analyzing style, arrangement, and content using ethos, logos and pathos provides a means to get at persuasion. It is a straight-forward model but that is part of its effectiveness. And I hope I have demonstrated that the model is theoretically defensible as well as practical.

Finally, the model, once in place, is pedagogically useful--as I have tried to indicate by my examples. Not only is it a heuristic for persuasion, but it creates a structure within which to organize discussions of relevant, contemporary research in rhetoric.

Persuasion knows few absolutes. It is a chameleon among discourses, changing its color--its shape and

substance--depending upon circumstances. A way to analyze persuasion is to focus upon the forces--the means--of persuasion and their influence upon the different levels of cognitive structure.